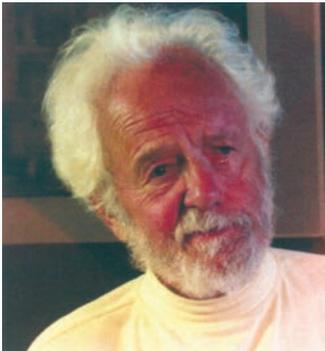


Solidarity from below

Michael Barratt Brown



In his autobiography, Seekers, Michael recounted how he met Ken Coates.

... Side by side with my work in the extra-mural department [of Sheffield University], I became involved in founding and chairing a Society of Industrial Tutors. This was not a trade union but a think-tank, preparing materials and organising conferences of tutors from universities, trade unions, the Workers' Educational Association and technical colleges, all engaged in industrial studies courses. I had strong support from my deputy, Geoffrey Stuttard of London University. Geoffrey had, as I discovered rather surprisingly, been on the other side in Yugoslavia, supporting the Chetniks against Tito, but we worked well together. We even saw Michael Foot, the minister responsible, to persuade him to extend more widely shop stewards' day release for industrial studies. Michael had given a very generous review to a book which I had written called, rather hopefully, *From Labourism to Socialism*. The book was full of warnings about the concentration of capital in the hands of a few giant transnational companies, a fact which Michael recognised as of great importance. The response to this development by Labour at the top was not clear. We had to begin from below.

A further extension of my work with the industrial tutors was my involvement in discussions, led by Ken Coates of Nottingham University extra-mural department, on workers' control in industry. We had a first meeting in Nottingham with a number of trade union officials and several industrial tutors including Tony Topham of Hull University. Ken and Tony went on to write the major two-volume history of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU). The Nottingham

meeting initiated a long and close personal friendship between Ken and me, which ended only with Ken's death in 2010.

We formed an Institute for Workers' Control and organised a series of conferences with the support of leading trade unionists, in particular, Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers' Union and Hugh Scanlon of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). Several thousand men and women attended our conferences in different cities, and we had the support of Tony Benn at the Department of Industry. He came to some of our conferences and took the concept of workers' control into actual practice in several industrial experiments. The involvement of Tony in our work led to the development of a very close relationship between him and Ken Coates, in which I had a very minor share. The Institute published a regular Bulletin, three *Annual Trade Union Registers*, and a good number of pamphlets and books on particular industries.

The climax came with the public ownership under workers' control of the Upper Clyde Shipyard. Three of my friends were involved in different ways, with me representing the Institute. Tony Benn gave industrial ministerial support. Robin Murray wrote up the story in a little book for the Institute, and Ken Alexander was appointed chairman of the company that took over the whole operation of the yard. One source of constant support was Michael Meacher MP, who became a minister for the environment in a later Labour Government.

Founding these organisations – industrial day release classes, an Industrial Tutors' Society, an Institute for Workers' Control – might just seem to be making space where one could talk and write together with agreeable comrades, and forget that the aim was to help them to lay the foundations for building a better society for working people. When in the next chapter we look at the founding of the Northern College and in the last chapter at the founding of a fair trade movement in the UK, the same question has to be asked about the long-term aim. It was never for me a top-downward exercise, but always an attempt to support the building of solidarity and co-operative activity from below.